

# VAYEIRA



## INSPIRATION

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### CHUMASH MESORAS HARAV

הנה נא הואלתי לדבר אל אדני ואנכי עפר ואפר  
(בראשית יח:כז)

*Behold now I am aware that I have just begun to speak to the Lord, although I am dust and ashes.*

This phrase has become a foundation of our worldview.

The halachah built the laws of modesty on the dichotomy of importance and worthlessness. On the one hand, modesty derives from *I am aware that I have just begun to speak to the Lord*, the consciousness of man's importance due to his perpetual standing in the presence of the Infinite. We must never forget God's constant presence, and this knowledge will always give us worth and importance. The infinite God is man's companion. When Judaism speaks of man's importance, it does not ground this importance only in man's intellect or his spirit, as the Greeks did. The human body is even more important to Judaism. Every organ is holy; every

member of the body has an important function; every physiological function is important. The body must be clean and holy; we must not defile ourselves by lowering our bodies to the level of an animal. Respect the body, its impulses and functions. If God is willing to walk with a human being, then both body and soul are significant. In this sense, the laws of modesty are the antithesis of *I am dust and ashes*, the notion that an individual is worthless. On the other hand, modesty is also based on the principle of *I am dust and ashes*. Forgetting this principle can undermine the basis of sanctity and morality. Immorality stems from pride, from those who love themselves and glorify themselves, from those who believe that whatever pleases them and whatever they wish to do is permissible. It has thus come about that the word *tzeni'us*, which means modesty and humility, has transformed into a term referring to sexual morality. Modesty and the message of *I am dust and ashes* are also apparent in another

context. Other nations offer us accounts of the lives of their great figures with many biographical details. For example, Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates, who lived more than twenty-four hundred years ago, are well known to us. We know their works and are fairly well informed about their private lives. However, we have very little biographical information about our great men: not only those who lived thousands of years ago, but even the great men who lived in the eighteenth century, such as the Gaon of Vilna and Reb Chaim of Volozhin. The little we do know about them is known to us only by accident; for example, a chance fact in one of their responsa that casts some light on their private lives. They appear to us anonymously, like mute figures, without a name or a time frame. Who were the members of the Great Assembly who saved our people from disappearing? Our Sages tell us that 120 Sages established the Great Assembly, but we know only a few names: Ezra,

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### CREATING A WORLD FOR GOOD



Avraham Avinu has always been considered to be the paradigm of Chesed, loving-kindness. In this week's parsha alone, we note numerous instances of his amazing level of benevolence. In the beginning of the parsha, we find Avraham Avinu lying outside of his tent – in clear discomfort, being that this was the third day after

his circumcision-- searching for guests. When Avraham saw three strangers walking in the desert, he jumped up and ran out to greet them and invite them into his tent. After telling them he would only bring them a little bit of water and bread, he ended up giving the strangers a smorgasbord of meat, cakes, and cream! Not only that, but our sages teach us

that Avraham actually slaughtered three whole cows, just so that each stranger could get the choicest cut of meat from the cow. Even the seemingly random act of "planting an Eishel tree in Beer Sheva" (Bereishis 21:33) was, in fact, an act of Chesed. Rashi there explains that the Eishel (אשל) is an acronym for ש'תיה א'כילה ל'ויה – Avraham created a full-service inn

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# FIVELIGHTS

## 5 INSPIRATIONAL HIGHLIGHTS ON THE PARSHA

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# 1

Elie Wiesel once remarked, “In my own way, I speak of Isaac constantly, in all my writings. In fact, I speak of almost nothing else.” It is hardly surprising that after surviving the Holocaust, Wiesel would find meaning and solace in the story of the Akeda. But aside from the sacrifice of Isaac, Wiesel finds something else comforting in his life example. He writes:

*“I find that laughter belongs to Jewish history. It takes part in Jewish mystery. Example: Isaac, the second patriarch, is after all called Isaac. Why Isaac, he who will laugh? Why does he laugh? The most tragic figure in Jewish history after all is Isaac... almost killed by his father, for his Father. I believe therein lies the secret of Jewish existence, because Isaac for me is the first survivor of the first Holocaust... And in spite of everything, Isaac... was capable of laughter.”*

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# 2

“Like a waving flag” is how the Maharal explains the purpose of life’s tests. The word for test in Hebrew is Nisayon, which, explains Maharal, derives from the same word, Neis (as found in Psalms 60:6) meaning “banner” or “flag.”

Tests are like a flag because they give people a banner which they can rally around. **The tests of life are what concretize our potential.**

When struggling in life, don’t imagine yourself sitting through a difficult exam; rather, imagine yourself hoisting up a flag onto a long mast. It requires effort, but in the end your potential will wave above for you and everyone to see.

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# 3

Being a hero can be an illness. Sometimes, people become so enamored with the glory and fame of saving other people they actually create desperate situations just so they can resolve them. In fact, “Hero’s Syndrome,” is a real psychological disorder.

Avraham was on the other end of the spectrum. Following the story of the Akeda, the Torah emphasizes twice that Avraham “walked together” with everyone else returning from the incident (see 22:6, 8). Why is this such an important facet of the story? Rav Shamshon Rephael Hirsch explains that the Torah is emphasizing that Avraham did not allow his heroic spiritual courage to go to his head. He returned with the other members of his party – no better, no worse. Real heroes aren’t motivated by the parade or the glory – they are motivated by a sense of duty and responsibility, a sense that we all must share together.

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# 4

A famous wizard once remarked, “I don’t go out looking for trouble, trouble usually finds me.”

Now that may be a sensible attitude towards trouble, but the opening of our parsha is a reminder that it is the wrong attitude when it comes to kindness.

Rashi notes that the description of Avraham in the opening of the parsha is repetitive. “And he lifted up his eyes and behold he saw three men standing – and he saw and he ran to greet them” (18:2). Why does it repeat the fact the Avraham saw?

Rashi explains that when it comes to bestowing kindness on others it is not enough to wait until those opportunities find you – you need to go out looking for them. Avraham at first saw three men standing, however this fact is repeating to note that seeing is not enough. Avraham was proactively searching and trying to figure out if someone in his vicinity needed a good word or a good deed. He didn’t wait for opportunities of kindness to find him – he went out looking for them.

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# 5

This story of Akeidas Yitzchak – the Sacrifice of Isaac, which has become the source of strength for generations of sacrifice within the Jewish people, is not actually very long. Yitzchak only speaks twice. He famously asks his father Avraham, after seeing the fire and wood, “where is the lamb?” The exchange immediately before this is much more overlooked and far more puzzling:

וַיֹּאמֶר יִצְחָק אֶל אַבְרָהָם אָבִיו וַיֹּאמֶר אָבִי וַיֹּאמֶר הֲנִי בָנִי

And Yitzchak said to his father Avraham, “Father,” and Avraham responded, “I am here, my son.”

What was the meaning of this exchange? What were they sharing with one another?

Yitzchak, beginning to realize the momentous sacrifice that was about to occur, turned to his father, his model of strength. “Father, אָבִי, you give me strength. Your dedication gives me strength. Your love בְּנִים אֵב עַל בְּנִים אֵב gives me strength.”

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“There is a crack in everything, that’s how the light gets in.”

“You want it darker  
We kill the flame  
Hineni, Hineni  
I’m ready my Lord”

– Leonard Cohen (1934-2016)

# SEE IT **INSIDE**

Parsha ideas that are so good, you have to see them inside!

- RAMBAN 18:1** Was it all a dream?
- OHR HACHAIM 18:1** The degree to which God reveals Himself to people is proportionate to the depth of His relationship with them.
- SEFORNO 18:1** The source to prepare a special chair for a Bris Milah.
- RAMBAN 18:23** What does it mean that God gets angry?
- RAMBAN 19:8** Eretz Yisroel demands holiness from its inhabitants.
- RAMBAN 22:1** Why does God test us?

A woman once asked the Bais Ha'Levi (the Rav of Brisk; great-grandfather and namesake of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik of Boston) whether one could fulfill the obligation of the Four Cups at the Seder with milk?

The Bais HaLevi answered in the negative and immediately gave the woman funds to buy meals for all of Passover.

His disciples asked him why didn't he just give her enough money for wine. His answer - the last two cups of the seder are drunk after the meal. If the woman plans to use milk for the last two cups, it could only be because she has neither meat nor chicken to serve at the Seder meal. If there is no meat or chicken for the Seder - usually the most festive Pesach event - there is obviously none for the rest of the holiday. She accordingly needs funds for the entire holiday.

It is not always so obvious how opportunities for kindness present themselves. You need to be proactive and look for people in need - or you simply will miss them. It's not enough to be nice - true chessed requires strategy and proactivity. So keep your eyes open or you may not see your next opportunity for kindness.

Stories Around the Campfire



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## CHUMASH MESORAS HARAV CONTINUED FROM FRONT

Nehemiah, Shimon the Righteous. Who were the members of Beis Shammai and Beis Hillel? Who were the *chasidim rishonim*? Who were the *soferim* or the sons of prophets, who, say our Sages, numbered in the thousands?

This striking concept expresses the modesty of the great Sages. The individual Sage's importance stems from the fact that his life was devoted to the eternity of the Jewish people, as manifested in the oral law. What is important is his contribution to this

eternity: his statements, his laws, his amendments, and his worldviews. His private life is of no interest. The great men of our nation were shy; they did not seek to put their private lives before the public; *I am dust and ashes.*

**The Mesoras HaRav Chumash**, based on the teachings of Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, was edited by Dr. Arnold Lustiger.



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# RABBI LENNY MATANKY



Rabbi Matanky is rabbi of Congregation K.I.N.S. and Dean of Ida Crown Jewish Academy.

## WHO WAS YOUR MENTOR OR ROLE MODEL IN JEWISH LEADERSHIP?

My father. My father was very involved in community and I saw how he was involved in many things. He was involved in starting organizations and always made sure that he gave back to the community, and not just took.

## WHAT ASPECT OF JEWISH LEADERSHIP WAS THE BIGGEST SURPRISE TO YOU?

I think it's the fact that more people don't want to take leadership roles and that there are people who want to be served and don't always understand the need to step forward and help.

## WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE TORAH IDEA ABOUT LEADERSHIP?

There is a beautiful Chasam Sofer on Parshat Vayera where Hakadosh Baruch Hu is speaking and he says, "While I withhold information from Avraham" and then he tells him about Sedom. The Chasam Sofer asks "Why does he have to withhold information from Avraham? Avraham was a Navi." The

answer he gives is that Avraham Avinu made a choice in life. He chose to work with people, he had all these people he converted and all these people surrounded him. And knowing full well that he was working with people, he would not be able to rise to the same heights of greatness he could have risen to if he had been by himself and only looked out for himself. So Avraham Avinu was the paradigm of leadership. He showed that a true leader understands that he may have to give up something that he may have gotten in order to help others.

*Interview conducted by Ilana Paskoff, member of NCSY's National Board.*

## CREATING A WORLD FOR GOOD CONTINUED FROM FRONT

where weary travelers could stay when they were tired. Later on in the Parsha, we learn about Hashem's plan to destroy the evil cities of Sodom and Amora; cities that directly contradicted Avraham's life-work. Avraham's mission was to fix the world by doing good deeds, while these cities were the direct antithesis of that. Even so, Avraham stilled prayed that they would be saved.

This is all fine and dandy, but the question begs to be asked - why now? Why do we only start mentioning all of Avrahams great deeds now? If this was Avraham at age ninety-nine, we can safely assume that earlier in his life he also did good deeds, yet the Torah never tells us of other acts of kindness he did until now. Why the sudden mentioning in Parshas Vayeira?

The Slonimer Rebbe answers by

introducing a powerful idea. True, Avraham had always done good deeds. The difference between the acts which he performed over the past ninety-eight years and the acts which he performed in this week's parsha, is the fact that he became circumcised, he had a bris. During a Bris, the Mohel removes the orlah, foreskin, which symbolizes all the negativity and garbage inside of us that creates the perception of distance from Hashem. It is only after the orlah is removed that Avraham could attain a true and complete connection with Hashem, and allow him to do these amazing acts of Chesed. In order for Avraham to build a world of loving-kindness, he first had to remove all of the filth from within himself, he had to remove all of the negativity that was holding him back.

All of this was only possible after

Avraham took the first step in giving himself a Bris Milah, which is no easy task. After that initial push on Avraham's part, Hashem was able to come into his life completely, allowing him to reach his full potential. So too with us, we can only reach our potential once we try first. We cannot be expected to be given everything, but if we put in the effort then Hashem will help us the rest of the way so we can reach our full potential. As we sing so beautifully, "Lo Alecha Hamlacha Ligmor..." it is not incumbent upon you to finish the work, Hashem will help you out as long as you put in your effort. It might seem hard to change for the better, but if you put in the effort to remove the orlah --all the bad influences and negativity in your life-- then Hashem will give you the strength to persevere.

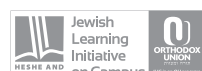
*Eli Szafranski is a member of NCSY's National Teen Board.*



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